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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a study on the training and characteristics that make for effective assistance personnel involved in implementing school improvement programs. The purpose of the study was to identify the entry skills and characteristics of assistance personnel, how and what they learn during their involvement in school improvement, the specific skills and strategies they use in their work, and what outcomes they help to achieve. The three improvement programs studied were a constituency-based renewal program, an effective schools program, and a teacher growth program. From each program five to six assisters were chosen who had been identified as highly successful. The research consisted of a series of interview guides, which were given to the assisters, the program managers, and teachers, principals, and parents. The paper describes assisters' educational and job experience backgrounds upon entry into the various programs and describes their teaching, curriculum/content knowledge, academic, administrative/organizational, and interpersonal skills. It was found that while the assisters had, in general, impressive entry characteristics, much learning was acquired on the job from their new roles in implementing improvement programs. The assisters felt that they received extensive support from peers, program managers, key school personnel, program trainers, and their own families and friends. The study indicates that while many of the skills necessary for successful assistance work can be generalized, many others are particular to an individual program and school and will be acquired on the job. (CG)

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EFFECTIVE ASSISTER BEHAVIOR: WHAT THEY BROUGHT AND WHAT THEY LEARNED.[1]

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The purpose of our project, Patterns of Successful Assistance in Urban School Improvement Programs, is to study effective assistance personnel who aid in the implementation of school improvement programs. Three school improvement programs presently operating in the metropolitan New York area are participating in this study: a constituency-based renewal program, an effective schools program and a teacher growth program. These three programs have all been functioning successfully in the New York area for a minimum of five years. The project, in collaboration with these three school improvement programs, aims to identify the specific functions of school assistance personnel that appear to be critical to the success of school improvement. This knowledge should help build practical ways of both selecting and training these assisters. The major research questions of the project designed to garner this information are: what are the entry characteristics of assistance personnel - what skills do they come in with? How and what do assistance personnel learn during their involvement in school improvement? What specific skills and strategies do able assistance personnel use in their work? What outcomes do successful assistance personnel help achieve?

With the help of the program managers, 5 to 6 assistance personnel, both those we judged highly successful and those functioning very adequately, were identified from each program for in-depth study. The research instruments consisted of a series of interview guides - two for each assister, two for each program manager and one for school-based personnel like teachers,

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[1] Read at the American Educational Research Association meetings, Chicago, April 1985.

principals, and parents. The guides were based on the research questions and designed to illustrate what assistance personnel do, how they do it, and why they are effective. Raw interview data were first coded, using a coding scheme based on the research questions, then entered into a computer, and finally retrieved by codes in order to isolate specific pieces of information pertaining to the various research questions. These pieces of information were then assembled and analyzed to identify patterns in and enable coherent discussion of successful assistance personnel behavior.

The main purpose of our paper is to identify the skills that assisters bring with them and discuss how these skills change, are modified and further developed by the experiences that the assisters face in the schools and by the needs demonstrated by each school site. It must be understood that the assisters we studied were all selected by the program managers to specifically carry out the mandates of the three improvement programs. Thus, these assisters are more than just "regular" people; they are individuals who were given a role in the school improvement programs because they had been identified as skilled and able. It is also important to note that the success of these individuals as school change facilitators is aided by the structure afforded by the school improvement program. This structure provides the assisters with an agenda to follow in their school improvement work, and ensures that they have direction when they enter the schools. Given these factors, we plan to focus on the assisters themselves and discuss first their entry skills, and then the learnings they acquire on the job. Added to this discussion will be the insights we have gained as to the support systems and structures aiding assister learning and the learning styles of individual assisters. The question we address is, "Are change agent skills, both those owned and those acquired over time idiosyncratic, or are these skills

teachable and transferrable to prospective or practicing change agents?"

Entry Characteristics and Skills: What Assisters Came With.

According to the data generated by the interviews, assistance personnel, both average and outstanding, arrive at schools with a wide range of skills, talents and experiences that could be categorized under 5 headings: Teaching skills; Curriculum/Content Knowledge skills; Academic skills; Administrative/Organizational skills; and Interpersonal skills. More important than these skill clusters is our realization that these skills seem to facilitate assister entry and help legitimize assister presence in the schools.

Teaching Skills

Without exception, all the assisters involved in the study had been teachers for periods ranging from two to over 16 years, in both public and private schools. Most of the assisters had taught at the elementary level, but had not remained with one particular grade and had instead moved around and worked with a number of elementary grades. The balance had taught at the junior or senior high level, while a small group had experienced teaching at all three levels. Besides classroom teaching, a number of assisters had assumed diverse teaching roles outside the classroom as, for example, resource teachers, content specialists, counselors, librarians. Assisters were not only teachers of children but also teachers of adults in a number of capacities - as college instructors, as staff developers, as inservice or district trainers and as supervisors. Thus, as a group, assisters entered the school improvement process as experienced master teachers, aware of the complexities inherent in the teaching role. This quality helped them connect with teachers and build credibility as people who know how to teach almost anything, "from hatching eggs on". A typical description of the assister from the school's perspective

was someone who, "knows her curriculum, knows her teaching methods, knows what she's talking about", someone who is a "super peer". Assisters were also armed with an understanding of how adults learn, which prepared them for work with the adults in the various school sites. Their teaching experience served a dual purpose - they were like teachers and understood the teachers' perspective; they knew adult learners and could teach them.

Curriculum/Content Knowledge Skills

Assisters had taught a wide range of subjects and had acquired curricular expertise. Reading, writing and mathematics were most often named as areas of proficiency. Added to these were social studies, computer literacy, gifted education, instructional technology, early childhood education and remedial instruction. A majority of the assisters had been involved in curriculum development on the school and district level. For example, work with the Division of Curriculum and Instruction, involvement in the Early Childhood Program for the State, plus participation in curriculum development in a number of subject areas such as reading and writing. So, assisters were not only teachers, but teachers knowledgeable in some content area. They had not only taught the subjects but had organized content into curricula. They possessed practical teaching skills, 'how-to' curriculum development skills that are invaluable to educators, skills that helped validate them as teacher-helpers with abilities grounded in real, live experiences.

Academic Skills

The assisters had entered the school improvement process holding academic qualifications in education, psychology, sociology, administration and supervision, reading, educational communication and even law. Besides being multi-degreed individuals, assisters appeared invested in ongoing learning and stayed abreast of current educational practices and issues by attending

conferences, workshops, seminars and non-credit courses (in, for instance, computer education, classroom and time management, teacher effectiveness, organizational change, conflict resolution, adult education, and counseling). This academic preparation appears to not only have added to the marketability of the assisters in terms of the skills they had to offer, but it seems to have provided them with a theoretical framework within which to operate as school change facilitators. As one assister put it, "[I had an] academic understanding of how schools improve, how change takes place, how to develop staff...I really [had] something to give."

Administrative/Organizational Skills

Besides teaching ability, assisters brought with them some understanding of how organizations and groups operate. Most of the assisters had held non-teaching positions within schools, the district or the community. Several of the assisters had functioned as grade leaders, chapter chairs or administrative assistants in the schools where they were employed. In these positions, they had provided leadership and support to other teachers and served as liaisons between teachers and administrators. As administrative assistants, involved in day-to-day school management, like scheduling and crisis intervention, assisters gained the organizational skills needed to keep the school functioning. Most assisters had also been active in the community as school board members, parent leaders, or community organizers. From this they learned, "how a culture works and how you work to empower people to do what they wanted to do". They acquired "a fuller view of the politics in running a school" and were "introduced to parent power in school effectiveness". Thus, many of these assisters entered the school improvement process knowing how schools function from a variety of perspectives - the teacher's, the parent's and the administrator's. They had served in supportive

roles and aided teacher-administrator communication. They had experienced mobilizing and directing group energy. In essence, they were prepared to tackle school improvement and ready to provide support and leadership, take care of organizational details, utilize community resources, involve the various school factions in the improvement process.

Interpersonal Skills

Working with schools and school personnel to orchestrate change requires, beyond technical know-how, being able to deal with people, build rapport and trust, establish a niche in the school and become part of that school, an "insider". Interpersonal skills become the key to connecting with school people, gaining their confidence and developing personal relationships that promote sharing, collaboration and collegiality. The term "risk-takers", was used by program managers to describe many of the assisters involved in this study. These assisters were apparently not intimidated by challenges and in fact invited new experiences. Assisters were seen as "forceful", "outgoing" and "assertive"; in fact one assister said, "I'm a fighter, I'm stubborn; I don't give up". However, they tempered this 'head-on-ness' with soft qualities like tolerance, wit, humor, charm, empathy and diplomacy. So, they were 'take charge' people, ready to direct, motivate and initiate action without much trepidation, yet they were also "approachable and human", "could work with anyone" and could "put people at ease". Their personalities would "immediately disarm you" and help break down resistance and antagonism. As one program manager said of one assister, she could "blind you with personality" and "charm [you] to death". Finally, most assisters were committed to the change process and "willing to give of self beyond regular work". They were described as being conscientious, diligent, hardworking people who, "never slough things off" and were "very prompt in delivering services". Thus, as a group, these

assisters had personalities that could win clients over and foster interpersonal exchange. They came to schools as initiators and leaders, ready to work hard and produce, yet they balanced this directive, strong-willed side with "heart and compassion" so they would be able to listen as well as lead. Table I summarizes assister entry characteristics and provides examples.

TABLE I: ENTRY CHARACTERISTICS, WITH EXAMPLES

Teaching : Came as a master teacher; teacher for 15 years; reading specialist for 5 years; I teach a college course in Reading Dignosis; teacher of many grades and age levels and out of classroom positions.
Curriculum/Content Knowledge : Helped write kindergarten manual; strong curriculum background in reading and writing; produced a lot of curriculum materials; knowledgeable in the academic areas;
Academic : Degree in Administration/Supervision; took workshops at Teachers College; I'm certified in clinical and school psychology; Ed.D in reading; I have 30 credits past the Masters; took many courses.
Administrative/Organizational : School Volunteer Coordinator for Central Board; active in community and political organizations; tremendous organizational skills; knew process of how to work with groups; grade leader; teacher in charge of annex.
Interpersonal: vivaciousness and liveliness; diplomacy, tact, charm and willingness to learn; non-threatening; good listener; human qualities were what attracted us; outgoing, eager, jolly; positive and outright.

Assister Learning on the Job

Even though the assisters had impressive skills and abilities and much prior experience, it became clear as we looked at assister on-the-job learning that much new learning is involved when people take on a new role. This is especially dramatic in the role of assistance personnel. Though many of them had been involved in a variety of roles and therefore understood the perspectives held by different groups, there was something substantially different about being responsible for working with principals, teachers and the community as a combined group in efforts to improve the school. While all

the assisters had worked with teachers and as curriculum developers, and most of them had also worked in a variety of other capacities, schools don't readily make room for outsiders. In their assistance role, all the assisters had to confront the social realities of the school culture as outsiders somehow pushing their way into the school, legitimating their position, mobilizing the faculty and building commitment to particular school improvement programs.

Learning to Work Within the School Culture

Most of the assisters in this study reported that they learned the complexities of how schools work and the dailiness almost as if it were a new experience. One assister summed his learnings by saying, "I know school and how it works". They saw in graphic terms the isolation and vulnerablility of teachers and how they differ in terms of strngths and weaknesses. In their efforts to establish a structure for school improvement, they had to work with principals and quickly realized that some principals thwarted their efforts. Other principals demanded that workshops have "outcomes", or asked them for a strict accounting of how they spent their time. Principals' practices were also observed and these observations revealed a complex relationship between principals and teachers often characterized by avoidance, tension and misunderstanding. At times, no one seemed to support <u>anyone's</u> work. Assisters soon learned that no school improvement program will have a good chance of success unless the principal supports the activities. As one assister put it, "the school climate and the administrator style" are the two most critical parts of a school.

Learning to Legitimize the Assister Role

Even as the assisters were learning to weave their way around the school culture, they were confronted by the reality that they had to <u>do</u> something.

They had to organize activities, make themselves useful, prove to both principal and teachers that they had something to offer. The assisters, driven by the particulars of their program, did many things. They developed a variety of techniques for gaining acceptance by the teachers and principal. They provided "hands on" experiences to get people interested. They learned that they must break into everyday routines, but facilitate everyday happenings in a fresh way. They worked to facilitate individual and group learning. They provided circumstances and activities where people learned to communicate with one another. For example, several of the assisters taught teachers how to provide for an agenda, how to chair a meeting, how to summarize, how to move from purposes to action. In their efforts to legitimate their position and their program, they learned to demonstrate new teaching techniques, to organize and run workshops, to organize their time better.

Learning Other New Skills

Being confronted with what appeared to be an initially hostile group, these assisters learned to view people in a more wholistic way in order to make provisions for their learning. In a larger sense, assisters learned, "to be part of the system, but not be coopted by it". They struggled with the "collegial/expert" dichotomy. In working with adults, they learned to "listen more and suggest less" and to "resist jumping in with too many solutions". But they also "learn[ed] by doing" - a skill they had acquired as teachers - and suffered the consequences of trial and error learning.

Several of the assisters reported that they thought they were pretty good as assisters and didn't realize how much they <u>didn't</u> know until they were in their schools for a while. Being responsible for making school improvement happen, regardless of the type of school improvement program, involved a tremendous amount of self learning.

Self Learning

Regardless of the very substantial skills and experience these assisters had to begin with, they reported an enormous amount of changes in themselves as a result of their new role. Many of them spoke about their new-found confidence. They became more secure in the role, but also reported feeling more secure in general. The experience for some involved, "a better understanding of people", "a greater amount of energy I didn't know I had". Several reported coming to an understanding of how they learn. Some learn by "reflection and negotiation", others are "visual and tactile", while others are "voracious readers". In the school improvement process, they learned more about themselves. "I have learned that I need to see the whole picture and then look at the pieces". Or, "I can't believe I have learned to motivate, to lead, to inspire, to encourage, to support, and yes - even to manipulate". It appears that while providing professional development for teachers and principals, the assisters experienced some powerful self-learning as they struggled to build a structure for school improvement that cuts across the school culture. Table II summarizes assister learning and provides examples.

TABLE II: ASSISTER LEARNING, WITH EXAMPLES

School Culture : learning the culture; getting more of a handle on how the whole school system works; get to know all the players; dealing with principal style; wean them away from me.

Legitimizing Role: Used to breaking down resistance; keep high visibility; develop agenda with a purpose and monitor time; techniques for specific curriculum areas; how to plan and administrate.

Other Skills: human behavior and dynamics of communication; learning to use any input as constructive; non-judgmental attitude; overcoming my own personality tendency to move too quickly and speak out.

Learning About Self: tackle any job I set my mind to do; confidence allowed me to be more helpful; I can act more on what I determine is best; more aware of my strengths;

Learning Style : mull something over and then experiment with solutions; combination of academic and experience; get in there and try; self-directed; concretize it for myself; self-reflective.

Assister Learning: Support and Structure

Assisters saw a number of support systems as critical to their development into mature change facilitators. Support provided by peers, namely other assistance personnel, was mentioned most often and considered most important by all assisters. Peers provided support in a number of ways; "everyone had a certain skill, spirit and morale", and could share expertise and technical knowledge; peers could be counted on to listen and keep confidences; experienced assisters would support fledgling assisters by modeling, sharing experiences and offering solutions; assisters used each other as sounding boards because, all the assisters "face stress and have had confrontations", necessitating the "need to bounce off ideas on someone in your corner". Assisters found that it helps when "you find you're not the only one going through this".

One of the school improvement programs involved in this study, The

Effective Schools Program, pairs assisters so that each assister works in the field with a partner. For this group of assisters, peer/partner support was most valued. Said one assister of his struggle to bring about change, "the saving grace was having a partner", who was "like a cop in your squad car" and could offer moral support. For these assisters, having a partner to work with and lean on meant not having to be alone in the field.

Program managers provided key support by being available to talk, by visiting the school sites and mediating in difficult situations, by providing staff development in the form of conferences or visitations to other programs, and by offering strategies and suggestions. In some instances, the most effective way program mangers could support assisters was by ensuring that assisters were allowed the time, at monthly meetings for example, to come together and touch base.

Assisters depended on many other sources of support. Though these sources were not mentioned as frequently as program manager or peer support, they were no less valuable when it came to helping assisters cope with their challenging and taxing positions. In some cases, assisters received support from key school people like the principal, the chapter chair or teachers, support in the form of good strokes and recognition of when, "you know you've done a good job". Other assisters connected to people on the district level or to program trainers and used them to reduce anxiety and provide a different perspective. Assisters also depended on personal support systems and leaned on their families, mainly spouses, and friends for support.

From this discussion, it is evident that assisters need support and manage to get it by tapping a combination of peer, program, school and personal sources. It is, however, interesting to note that assisters, as they gained experience and became more confident, began to depend less and less on

outside sources of support and learned more and more to look inward to find inner strength. One assister commented, "I don't have as much need for the support system now as I did in that early period", while another noted, "my support is a lot more internal now". Thus, it seems that assisters became more resourceful as they grew professionally and experientially. However, this independence apparently does not cancel out the need for external support structures. As one assister said, this "could be a lonely job without the other [assisters]".

The learning opportunities, available to assisters comprised a final source of support. The majority of the assisters were systematically oriented to their improvement program, and introduced to the programs' "general philosophy" and history, and trained in a range of areas such as, "identifying needs, decision-making, group process, facilitation, negotiation, planning, teacher effectiveness and classroom management". "Hands-on workshops", conferences, role-playing, simulation exercises and "expertly and vividly presented" peer presentations all served as vehicles for this initial training. Outside advisors and consultants were employed to teach specific skills, such as "conflict resolution, test sophistication, mastery learning, or writing process".

Assisters generally rated the initial training and preparation highly. However, some assisters expressed "the need to feel more current" and the feeling that "at this point training has been cut off" despite the fact that all three programs continue to provide ongoing training in some capacity. We speculate that this sentiment might stem from the fact that assisters seemed overwhelmed, at times, by the "sink or swim...on-the-job" informal learning experiences, in the face of which, formal training must have paled. Assisters found that school people "were a tough audience", and structured training

couldn't ensure success. A formally learned skill was not easily transferred to the sites, assisters still needed to, "develop among [them]selves ways to use it". Experience became the best teacher; "living through it", "doing it", and learning "to take the lumps" led to being able to "think about what you messed up and plan a better way". Thus, the reality of trying to orchestrate change in schools became both a formidable and a beneficial source of learning for the assisters. One assister aptly summed up by saying, "the daily challenge helps us to develop". Tables III and IV summarize assister support systems and learning structures and provide examples.

TABLE III: ASSISTER LEARNING SUPPORT SYSTEMS WITH EXAMPLES

Peer : Partner helped most; called each other and visited for support; drawing on colleagues; survived due to morale in office; share successes and failures; people complement one another; get it all off your chest.
Program Manager : Became a confessor; available on the phone; came to schools to prod committees and principals who might be reluctant; exceptionally supportive; lot of input into our learning; modelled ways I could work.
Key School People : Principal finds ways to indirectly support; the chair is not on the committee but has been supportive; principal did a lot; talking with a lot of teachers; biggest help was from...chapter chair.
District Level/Program Trainers : Trainers helped brainstorm; outside resources and contacts to get help; trainers gave us strategies...there to call upon and serve as resource; district superintendent...would pick up salary.
Personal : My husband listens ad naseum; my kids also support; personal relationships; I am from home situation that whatever I do is always supported; my wife is also a teacher; friendships.

TABLE IV: ASSISTER LEARNING STRUCTURES, WITH EXAMPLES

In-house : Staff workshops; staff meetings; two times a week met to develop group cohesiveness; intensive orientation; do's and don'ts; situations presented to us by experienced liaisons; given materials to read.
External : Attended many conferences; state leadership training workshops; weekend retreats; visitations to other programs; went to London; innovative schools in Maryland; guy from Temple; summer writing institute.
On-the-job : Observation; I made every mistake; I needed direction; sink or swim; in another situation I tried; forced to find my own resources; life experiences - my own reflections; by doing it; succeeding spurred me on;; some of it is just maturing;

Conclusion: So What?

Though we had hoped to be able to differentiate between the entry skills and learnings of highly successful and typical assisters, a preliminary scan of the data did not support such differences. The assisters brought a wide array of skills with them, and utilized similar support systems and learning structures. Yet, in spite of their credentials and their obvious abilities, the assisters became new learners as they assumed a role that forced them to have a multiperspective vision, to work with the whole school and indeed to take on the school culture in all its complexity. We asked at the beginning, "Are assister skills, both those owned and those acquired over time idiosyncratic, or are these skills teachable and transferrable to prospective assisters?"

Our partial answer is that the framework provided by the school improvement program, the role of assisters and the structure within which they work typically induce some central learnings. Are these teachable? We think so. We feel we have captured the learnings these assisters, across programs, hold in common, learnings that can be generalized to other individuals and programs involved in school change. But we also suspect that, to a degree, the context, the particular program assumptions and the individual assister's

characteristics result in the acquisition of situation-specific and program-specific skills.

Our next task is to develop materials and training modules to help prepare prospective assisters. The learnings the assisters hold in common appear manageable and seem to lend themselves o a variety of straightfoward training formats. But what of the "fuzzy" learnings that seem to grow out of the needs and cultures of the various sites? How can we ensure that our training materials will help assisters apply general learnings to specific situations without running the risk of differentiating these learnings so far that they become too personal and individual to be meaningful in a coherent preparation program? Since it is impossible to prepare assisters for every situation they will face in the school, we are continuing to struggle with how to provide "readiness" experiences that can capture the "idiosyncratic" nature of assisters' work. Perhaps the concept of situation-specific learnings is a start, simulation activities embedded in empirically grounded case studies drawn from the experiences of real live assisters. Such an approach could help neophyte assisters develop strategies for applying what they learn during preparation for what they face in the schools. Assisters will still continue to learn through trial and error; the context in which they do their work demands it. However, helping them make learning/application connections should, we feel, decrease some of the uncertainty inherent in the change facilitator's role.

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